

## THIRD MEETING OF SIGNATORIES TO THE MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING ON THE CONSERVATION OF MIGRATORY BIRDS OF PREY IN AFRICA AND EURASIA

*(Dubai, 3-6 July 2023)*

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### CONSERVATION OF AFRICAN-EURASIAN VULTURES

*(Prepared by the Coordinating Unit of the Raptors MOU and the Coordinator of the Vulture  
Coordination Team)*

**Summary:** This document reports on the progress to implement the Vulture Multi-species Action Plan adopted by CMS Parties with Resolution 12.10 - Conservation of African-Eurasian Vultures.

The Meeting is invited to take note of this document, to thank the members of the VMsAP Coordination Team for their coordination work carried out on a voluntary basis, to urge Signatories, Cooperating Partners and other stakeholders, to the extent of their possibility, to support the VMsAP Coordination Team and the implementation of the Action Plan and to participate in the Mid-Term Review process of the VMsAP.

Furthermore, to invite the West African Signatories to contribute to the ongoing development of the West African Vulture Action Plan and its future implementation.

1. The Conference of the Parties at its 12th meeting (COP12, Manila, 2017), adopted [Resolution 12.10 Conservation of African-Eurasian vultures](#) in which it adopts the [Multi-species Action Plan to Conserve African-Eurasian Vultures](#) (VMsAP) and urges Parties and encourages non-Party Range States, partners and stakeholders to implement it as a matter of priority and requests the Coordinating Unit of Raptors MOU, to facilitate continuation of the Vulture Working Group, subject to the availability of funds.
2. The Conference of the Parties at its 13th meeting (COP13, Gandhinagar, 2020) adopted [Decision 13.53 - Conservation of African-Eurasian Vultures](#) that directs the Coordinating Unit of the Raptors Memorandum of Understanding, to report to the next Meeting of Signatories of the CMS Raptors Memorandum of Understanding and subsequent meetings of the Sessional Committee of the CMS Scientific Council.
3. The present report implements Decision 13.53 and is based on the information gathered through the Vulture Coordination Group and the national reports from the Signatories and the Cooperating Partners to the Raptors MOU.
4. The Vulture Multi-species Action Plan (VMsAP) covers the geographic ranges of all 15 species of migratory African-Eurasian vultures and promotes actions to save the species by setting 12 objectives with a Framework of Actions with 124 activities. The plan also contains information on, or links to, existing plans: the Flyway Action Plan for the Conservation of the Balkan and Central Asian Populations of the Egyptian Vulture (Annex 4 to the VMsAP) and the Flyway Action Plan for the Conservation of the Cinereous Vulture (Annex 5 to the VMsAP). Finally, a Blueprint for the Recovery of Asia's Critically Endangered Gyps Vultures is included as Annex 6 to the VMsAP.
5. Since the last COP, three organizations have agreed to support the implementation of this VMsAP through a Coordination Team (VCT), facilitated by the Coordinating Unit (CU) of the Raptors MOU. The composition of the VCT is described below:
  - André Botha (Endangered Wildlife Trust) as Acting Overarching Coordinator;
  - Jovan Andevski (Vulture Conservation Foundation - VCF) as Acting Coordinator for Europe and Central Asia;
  - Chris Bowden (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) as Acting Regional Coordinator for the rest of Asia;
  - Mohammed Shobrak, who agreed to act as the Regional Coordinator for the Middle East;
  - Roger Safford (BirdLife International);
  - José Tavares (VCF); and
  - Nicola Crockford (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds).
6. The VCT meets regularly to share information, review funding opportunities, and plan for representation of the VMsAP at meetings and fora. These activities ensure that the VMsAP maintains its relevance and influence among the conservation community. The team contributes to Objective 12, which aims to advance vulture conservation through the effective promotion and implementation of the VMsAP.
7. The 'Global Summit for the Flyways' held in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, in April 2018 reaffirmed the urgency of implementing the VMsAP by governments, conservationists, protected area managers, livestock breeders, hunters, and veterinarians. The summit emphasized the importance of coordinating species action plans in general and, in particular, for the VMsAP, given the large number of species, threats, and Range States that it covers. The Declaration of

the Global Flyways Summit: Connecting Nature, Connecting People ([UNEP/CMS/ScC-SC3/Inf.2](#)) underscores these points.

8. At the European Vulture Conference organized by the VCF (1 - 4 October 2019, Albufeira, Portugal), the VCT, in partnership with the Coordinating Unit, led a plenary session dedicated to promoting the implementation of the VMsAP. The session provided an overview presentation of the plan and progress made in its implementation, along with short reports from the four acting Regional Coordinators. This was supported by the Environment Agency - Abu Dhabi (EAD) under the Migratory Species Champion Programme.
9. As of 2 May 2023, the VMsAP has been accessed 3,437 times and cited in 91 published peer-reviewed articles focused on vultures and their conservation, with a Research Interest Score of 66.0 according to the online tracking service ResearchGate. Furthermore, at the 15th Pan African Ornithological Congress (21 - 25 November 2022, Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe) the symposium "CMS Vulture Multispecies Action Plan: implementation in sub-Saharan Africa – an assessment of progress" gathered a significant number of research and conservation contributions, highlighting the importance of the VMsAP in guiding conservation and research efforts.
10. The VMsAP is used in the assessment of vulture-related proposals submitted for funding under the EU Life instrument. This recognition has helped to fund priority actions highlighted in the plan, contributing to its implementation and the conservation of vultures globally.
11. The [VMsAP Strategic Implementation Plan](#) was published in February 2020, with financial support from the Federal Office for the Environment of the Government of Switzerland. The plan includes an inventory of activities to date, as reported through stakeholder surveys and consultations over the past two years. Additionally, the document provides a roadmap of concrete priorities for delivering the agreed framework, including 11 flagship projects, relevant cooperation opportunities, and added impetus for mobilizing resources and support.
12. The Raptors MOU Coordinating Unit has tasked the VCT with carrying out the Mid-term Review of the VMsAP, as foreseen in the plan itself. The review was launched in early 2023, and a questionnaire has been circulated to all Range States, including Raptors MOU Signatories and Cooperating Partners, CMS Parties, and other vulture experts. Further consultation will take place at the European Vulture Conference (Caceres, Spain) in November 2023, and the final report is expected to be concluded in the first quarter of 2024. The Mid-term Review will provide a detailed overview of the implementation level of the VMsAP and assess the distance to the delivery of the 12 objectives set in the plan. It will contribute to strengthening the effectiveness and impact of the VMsAP in conserving and protecting vultures globally.
13. Objective 1 of the plan aims to significantly reduce the mortality of vultures caused by intentional or unintentional poisoning. To this aim the work carried out in Europe and Africa includes:
  - Engaging with local communities;
  - Establishing anti-poisoning police canine units;
  - Building the capacity of investigation officers to prevent poisoning, identify and respond to poisoning accidents effectively, and investigate them efficiently;
  - Training on Wildlife Poisoning Response over 7,000 learners from a range of stakeholder groups in 17 countries in Africa to date;
  - Establishing several regional and national databases to collect poisoning events such as the African Wildlife Poisoning Database and the Balkan Wildlife Poisoning Database, as well as national databases in Italy and Hungary.

14. Through the ongoing Balkan Detox LIFE project being implemented in seven Balkan countries the following activities have been implemented to date:
  - Staff members of enforcement and conservation agencies have been trained to effectively identify and investigate wildlife crime;
  - National working groups to fight against the use of poison baits were created;
  - National road maps against poisoning were developed;
  - Improvements to national legislation have been proposed;
  - A Wildlife Crime Academy has been established, where enforcement agents, toxicologists, and vets are trained in wildlife crime forensic techniques from Spanish peers.
  
15. Objective 2 of the plan aims to recognize and minimize the mortality of vultures by non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) that caused of the collapse of the South Asian vulture populations. Significant work has been done in South and Southwest Asia mostly under the coordination of the Saving Asia's Vultures from Extinction (SAVE) consortium, including:
  - Banning diclofenac in Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Iran, Nepal, Oman, Pakistan and Socotra. Bans are currently discussed in a few more range states;
  - Testing the toxicity for vultures of several NSAIDs;
  - Proving that Meloxicam and Tolfenamic acid are vulture-safe and effective anti-inflammatory drugs.
  
16. During CMS COP13, members of the VCT led two side events. The first event, "Vultures are still dying from poisoning, but the VMsAP is working" aimed to reiterate the priorities of the VMsAP and review the progress made in the fight against the use of poison baits and sentinel poisoning of vultures. The second event, "Veterinary drugs and the VMsAP: A call for wider action" highlighted the growing threat of NSAIDs on vulture populations and encouraged prompt implementation of VMsAP actions.
  
17. In 2022, a working group on NSAIDs was set up by the Technical Advisory Group of the Raptors MOU. The working group has developed a questionnaire on the use and licensing status of veterinary NSAIDs, which has been sent to Raptors MOU Signatories and Range States. Following the information gathered through the questionnaire, a fact sheet on NSAIDs and their impact on vultures and other scavenging raptors has been produced, alongside a specific [webpage](#). The goal is to raise awareness and encourage action to protect vultures from the harmful effects of vulture-toxic NSAIDs.
  
18. Objective 3 of the plan aims to fully implement CMS Resolution 11.15 on the phasing out of lead ammunition by hunters. To this end, the Secretariat has:
  - In close cooperation with the Secretariat of the Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA), the CMS Secretariat supported an ad-hoc CMS Expert Group for the Evaluation of Exposure of European Union Birds to Lead Fishing Weights and Lead Ammunition in Terrestrial Environments, established thanks to the voluntary work of several members of the Preventing Poisoning Working Group (PPWG). This ad-hoc group, supported by the CMS Secretariat and the Raptors MOU Coordinating Unit, responded to a call of the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA), and submitted comments on the ECHA Annex XV restriction report on lead in outdoor shooting and fishing in September 2021.

- ECHA's Committee for Risk Assessment (RAC) adopted its opinion on the restriction proposal in its meeting in May/June 2022. It supported the proposal while recommending a shorter transition time to phase out lead gunshot for hunting. The Committee for Socio-Economic Analysis (SEAC) adopted its opinion in its meeting in December 2022. The opinions of both committees were sent to the European Commission in February 2023. If approved by the European Parliament, the ban on lead-ammunition and fishing weights at all territories within the EU will be a major step forward to combatting the unintentional poisoning of migratory birds in this region.
  - The CMS Secretariat participated to a workshop on phasing out of lead in Southern Africa held in Johannesburg in late January 2023 during which a regional strategy to phase out the use of lead ammunition and fishing weights was discussed.
19. Objective 4 of the VMsAP aims to reduce and eventually halt the trade in vulture parts for belief-based use. Significant work has been carried out to deliver on this objective and specifically:
- In February 2020, the worst ever recorded mass poisoning of vultures occurred in Guinea Bissau, resulting in the killing of over 2,000 globally threatened Hooded Vultures (*Necrosyrtes monachus*) due to the demand for vulture parts for belief-based use;
  - The Secretariat coordinated with the Raptors MOU CU, VCF, the FAO office in West Africa and veterinary authorities in Guinea Bissau through several online calls and sent a letter to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development of Guinea Bissau, offering support;
  - The Raptors MOU CU, the VCF, the IUCN SSC Vulture Specialist Group, and BirdLife International collaborated to develop and implement a training workshop for the relevant authorities in Guinea Bissau. The workshop, which took place in May 2022, focused on improving the preparedness of institutions in Guinea Bissau to respond to and prevent further wildlife poisoning incidents;
  - The workshop also developed a list of Vulture Conservation Actions for Guinea Bissau;
  - Partly as a result of these efforts, in late 2022, a four years and two months prison sentence for poisoning and killing 50 Hooded Vultures was issued. This is the first conviction for an environmental crime in Guinea-Bissau and the first prison sentence in Africa related to the poisoning of vultures. It sets an unprecedented jurisprudence that shall serve as a reference for other cases.
20. The EU LIFE financial instrument has proven very effective in supporting vulture conservation with activities implemented also well beyond the EU's borders. The Raptor MOU CU has specifically supported, with funds from EAD, a LIFE project entitled Urgent Actions to Strengthen the Balkan Population of the Egyptian Vulture and Secure Its Flyway. The project has been recognized as one of the most ambitious conservation ventures in the history of vulture conservation involving 20 partners from 14 countries on three continents. As a result, the eastern-most European Egyptian Vulture population has stabilized for the first time, after decades of decline. The species has been downlisted to Vulnerable in 2020 in Europe. In the framework of the LIFE project, a review of the Egyptian Vulture Flyway Action Plan (Annex 4 to the VMsAP) was carried out.
21. Several other LIFE projects, including the LIFE Egyptian Vulture (Italy), Balkan LIFE Detox, LIFE Gypconnect, LIFE Rupis, have tackled priority threats and developed conservation actions that have also benefitted populations across their European range. For example, the Egyptian vulture has colonised Sardinia following action developed by the LIFE Safe for Vulture.
22. At the 18th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES COP18, Geneva, 2019), Decisions (18.186-192) were adopted with the aim of increasing understanding of the threats posed to West African vultures

and identifying actions to stop declines and allow population recovery. Decision 18.190 called for the Animals Committee (AC) to establish a working group on West African vultures to provide relevant recommendations. These CITES decisions offered the opportunity to cooperate, as instructed by CMS Decision 13.52, between the two Secretariats.

23. In response to those decisions, and to facilitate the Working Group on West African Vultures, the Raptors MOU CU and CITES Secretariat commissioned UNEP – WCMC to undertake a review of trade and sentinel poisoning for West African Vultures, focusing on the six key species: Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*), White-headed Vulture (*Trigonoceps occipitalis*), Hooded Vulture, White-backed Vulture (*Gyps africanus*), Rüppell's Vulture (*Gyps rueppelli*) and Lappet-faced Vulture (*Torgos tracheliotos*). The [report](#) highlighted key gaps in knowledge related to this trade of vultures and their parts and made recommendations for the Animals Committee to consider.
24. The CMS Secretariat, contributed to the CITES 31st Meeting of the Animals Committee (Online, 31 May – 24 June 2021) in proposing draft decisions for the 74th meeting of CITES Standing Committee (Lyon, 7-11 March 2022) and supported their approval at 19th COP of CITES (Panama city, 2022) in line with the VMsAP as the outcomes of the work of the CITES West African Vultures process.
25. In support of the above initiative, the IUCN SSC Vulture Specialist Group embarked on a process to engage with its membership in West Africa towards the drafting of a specific multi-stakeholder strategy to combat and reduce the impact of belief-based use on the remaining vulture populations in West Africa. The IUCN Conservation Planning Specialist Group was engaged by the Raptors MOU to assist with this process. The Raptors MOU supported a three-day workshop held in Abuja, Nigeria in October 2022 that brought together CMS National Focal Points, CITES National Authorities, other government representatives, as well as academia and non-governmental organizations from Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal. A final draft of the West Africa Action Plan is expected in late 2023. The Action Plan builds also on recent conservation initiatives in Nigeria and Niger that resulted in the decline, in some key areas, in the number of stalls selling vulture parts by 80-90%.
26. Significant progress has been made in regions that received funding from governmental and intergovernmental sources like the LIFE financial instrument of the European Union. However, in other regions, the successful execution of the VMsAP relies on enhancing coordination capacity, for which no resources have been allocated. Thus, it is of utmost importance to secure sufficient financial resources to: a) Support coordination efforts, and b) Facilitate the implementation of the VMsAP. Moreover, it is crucial to raise awareness and garner support for the plan throughout all areas encompassed by the VMsAP. This objective can be achieved by establishing an effective coordination structure.
27. Cases of vulture mortality are known to be caused by the highly pathogenic H5N1 strain of Avian influenza. This disease could pose a substantial risk to vulture populations that are already under pressure from other threats. Proper monitoring of the presence of the disease in wild and domestic avian populations and timely actions to reduce the likelihood of transmission between domestic and wild migratory birds is the key to addressing this threat..
28. The CMS Secretariat will propose at COP14 amendments to Resolution 12.10 to:
  - Update some references to strategic frameworks and global initiatives, such as the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

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- Include reference to the Egyptian Vulture New EU LIFE Project, the Mid-Term Reviews of the Egyptian Vulture Flyway Action Plan and of the VMsAP.
  - Include reference to the discovery of vulture-safe alternatives to Diclofenac and to the countries that have banned it.
  - Include a call for parties and other stakeholders to monitor the presence and impact of avian influenza in domestic and migratory wild birds and to take timely and effective actions.
29. New decisions will also be proposed to guide the Parties and other stakeholders toward the implementation of the VMsAP and toward addressing, in cooperation with CITES, the threat to Vultures in West Africa linked to the belief-based use of vulture parts.

**Action requested**

30. The Meeting of Signatories is invited to:
- (a) take note of this document;
  - (b) thank the members of the VMsAP Coordination Team for their coordination work carried out on a voluntary basis;
  - (c) urge Signatories, Cooperating Partners and other stakeholders to support, financially or with in-kind contributions, to the extent of their possibility, the work of the Vulture Coordination Team and the implementation of the VMsAP;
  - (d) urge the Signatories to participate in the Mid-Term Review process of the VMsAP;
  - (e) invite the West African Signatories to contribute to the ongoing development of the West African Vulture Action Plan and its future implementation.